

The Commodity Form and the Dialectical Method

Introduction

In the Preface to the First Edition of *Capital*, Marx makes evident that he was fully aware of the complexity entailed by the first steps in the critique of political economy. Thus he states:

Beginnings are always difficult in all science. The understanding of the first chapter, especially the section that contains the analysis of commodities, will therefore present the greatest difficulty.¹

The endless debates over the real meaning and implications of Marx's discussion of the commodity form seem to suggest that, if anything, Marx's warning actually fell short of the real difficulties at stake. And whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not, it is clear that the diverse readings of Marx's critique of political economy entail different political implications.² In fact, it could be argued – and, hopefully, this chapter and the ones that follow will substantiate this claim – that those 'minutiae', which the discussion of the determinations of the commodity form 'appear to turn upon',³ are of paramount importance for the conscious organisation of the revolutionary action of the proletariat. This is shown not only in Marx's insistence on the impossibility of correctly grasping the determinations of those more abstract social forms from the bourgeois standpoint of political economy,⁴ but also in the central role they played in his critique of the ideological representations of them coming from the working class movement itself, e.g. Proudhonian socialism.⁵

¹ Marx 1976g, p. 89.

² Dimoulis and Milios 2004.

³ Marx 1976g, p. 90.

⁴ Marx 1976g, p. 174.

⁵ See Clarke (1994) and Shortall (1994) for good reconstructions of Marx's critique of Proudhonian socialism based on the latter's misunderstanding of the nature of the commodity and money forms. Thus, the gist of Marx's critique of Gray's proposal to preserve private commodity production while replacing the money form with labour time certificates issued by a national bank, comes down to the latter's inability to comprehend the immanent necessity of the value of commodities to take on the independent form of money (see Elson 1979b, pp. 135–6). Similarly, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx ridicules Darimon's proposal of abolishing the privilege of money (that of being directly exchangeable for all commodities) by making 'by decree'

It is my view that this diversity in the ways in which Marx's followers have read the ideal reproduction of the determinations of the commodity form contained in *Capital* is closely connected to the varied methodological perspectives from which those authors have attempted to grasp the former. In other words, those different interpretations of the actual *content* of the first section of *Capital* express different understandings of the very *form* of scientific knowledge unfolded in that book. Seen the other way round, and this is the fundamental issue to be discussed in this chapter and the next, I would argue that only on the basis of a sound comprehension of the dialectical method can the implications of Marx's investigation of the commodity form be uncovered in all their plenitude.

The need to reconsider Marx's presentation of the commodity form in Chapter 1 of *Capital* through a reassessment of his dialectical method (in particular, its connection to Hegel's *Science of Logic*) has been widely recognised by a growing number of scholars. In effect, the last twenty to twenty-five years have witnessed a renewed interest in Marx's dialectical method and its implications for value theory.⁶ However, despite all the light that these works have cast on the form of Marx's argument, they have been mainly focused on the *synthetic* aspects of Marx's dialectical presentation (i.e. on the exposition of the dialectical movement from the 'abstract to the concrete'). In this sense, it could be argued that this literature has glossed over two further fundamental aspects of Marx's dialectical method, which I have discussed in the previous chapter. First, those works have not sufficiently thematised the peculiar role of the *phase of analysis* in Marx's dialectical investigation generally and in his presentation in *Capital* in particular. Second, they have not paid sufficient attention to the *specific form of the analytical process within dialectical thought*.⁷ My aim here, therefore, is to fill these gaps in the literature.⁸

all commodities directly exchangeable (Marx 1993, p. 126). In all these cases, the common thread of the Marxian critique lies in the incapacity of those authors to grasp the necessary inner connection between the commodity and money forms.

6 See, among others, Murray 1988; Smith 1990a; Moseley 1993; Moseley and Campbell 1997; Arthur 2002b; Albritton and Simoulidis 2003.

7 The distinction between analysis (in the sense of dissection of the 'whole' into 'parts' or 'identification of differences') and synthesis (in the sense of reconstitution of the 'unity' of the whole) is not peculiar to dialectics. As I argue below, what sets the latter apart from formal-logical methodologies is the specific *form* taken both by the analytical and synthetic processes in dialectical thought. Zelený provides a concise discussion of the different meanings of analysis and synthesis in science and philosophy, which also traces back their intellectual lineage (see Zelený 1980, Chapter 10).

8 These other aspects have not been entirely absent in the literature. However, they came up in

The main purpose of this chapter is to provide a methodologically minded critical reading of Marx's argument about the determinations of the value form of the product of labour in the first chapter of *Capital*. Through this reading, I shall substantiate the claim made in the first part of the book that *Capital* crystallises the positive deployment of the methodological insights gained by the 'young Marx' through his critique of Hegel, the Young Hegelians and Proudhon. In other words, I shall show that *Capital* contains Marx's dialectical method, as discussed in the first part, concretely set into motion for the intellectual reproduction of capitalist social forms. While this latter statement is true of the book as a whole (or, at least, to its first volume, the only one that Marx prepared for publication), the detailed examination of the structure of the first three sections of Chapter 1 is of particular significance. In effect, the exposition of the determinations of the commodity form contained there is, arguably, the most paradigmatic place where he presented the concrete workings of his dialectical method of research in the indissoluble unity of its analytic and synthetic stages.⁹ On these grounds, additionally, I will try to show that many of the confusions and misunderstandings among both followers and critics of Marx spring from an inadequate grasp of the dialectical structure of Marx's exposition.

Finally, this close examination of the expositional structure of the first three sections will set the stage for the discussion in the following chapter of this book, in which I discuss Marx's presentation of the fetish character of the commodity. As will become evident later on, only by properly grasping the precise content and formal structure of the first three sections of Chapter 1 of *Capital* can the specific object of exposition and systematic significance of the section on 'commodity fetishism' be fully appreciated.

the debate among 'new dialecticians' relatively late (Murray 2002; Reuten 2000) and have not been pursued any further until recently (see Reuten 2014, who does address in great detail the connection between analysis and synthesis, and that between inquiry and presentation, in systematic dialectics). See also Brown et al. (2002) for a discussion of some of these issues through a comparison between critical realism and systematic dialectics. Be that as it may, it is my view that compared to the light thrown on the synthetic aspects of Marx's method of presentation, the nature of the relation between analysis and synthesis in the presentation, and the way in which this relates to the formal determinations of the dialectical inquiry, have not been explored with the same degree of clarity.

9 Iñigo Carrera 2013.

Inquiry and Presentation, Analysis and Synthesis: On Some Controversies over the Initial Passages of Marx's Argument in *Capital*

In *Capital*, Marx puts into motion the discoveries which allowed him to overcome the limitations of his early account of alienated labour and its supersession. In contradistinction to the *Paris Manuscripts*, and as he clearly states in the *Marginal Notes on Adolf Wagner*, he takes as a point of departure neither the concepts of political economy nor any concept whatsoever,¹⁰ in order thereby to discover alienated labour as their presupposition. As the title of his most important work denotes, the subject whose determinations the dialectical investigation proceeds to discover and present is *capital*, which, as the alienated subject of social life becomes 'the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society' and must therefore 'form the starting point as well as the finishing point' of the ideal reproduction of the concrete.¹¹ In this sense, Marx's exposition in *Capital* does not advance towards the discovery of alienation, but instead starts from what the dialectical inquiry revealed as its most abstract and general form.¹² He starts with the immediate observation of the simplest *concretum* in which the alienation of labour is expressed in order to develop the real determinations specific to this social form.¹³ As has now been widely acknowledged, this starting point is not an ideal-typical – or worse, historically existent – simple commodity-producing society, as in the orthodoxy derived from Engels and popularised by authors such as Sweezy and Meek.¹⁴ In Marx's own words, he starts with the commodity as the 'economic cell form of bourgeois society'.¹⁵

We begin with the commodity, with this specific social form of the product – for it is the foundation and premise of capitalist production. We take the individual product in our hand and analyse the formal determinants that it contains as a commodity and which stamp it as a commodity.¹⁶

¹⁰ Marx 1975b, p. 198.

¹¹ Marx 1993, p. 107.

¹² Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 323; Meikle 1985, pp. 71–2; Schmidt 1983, pp. 48–9.

¹³ Marx 1975b, p. 198.

¹⁴ Engels 1980; Sweezy 1968; Meek 1973. For a critique of the Engelsian orthodoxy on this question, see Arthur 1996, 1997 and 1998b; Backhaus 1980; Robles Báez 2000; Reichelt 1995; Weeks 1981.

¹⁵ Marx 1976g, p. 90.

¹⁶ Marx 1976c, p. 1059.

However, Marx's presentation does not directly start with the essential determinations of the commodity form, but rather starts from the immediate observation of an individual commodity in its outward appearance.¹⁷ In a presentation which will prove full of 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'¹⁸ Marx shows that what determines the commodity as a form of social wealth is not only that, as any product of labour, it possesses a use value, but that the latter acts as the material bearer of a second attribute, namely, exchange value. The further analysis of the commodity reveals that exchange value is actually the form of expression of a content distinguishable from it – the value form, or the attribute of general exchangeability of the commodity – the substance of which resides in the abstract labour congealed in it, and whose magnitude is consequently determined by the socially necessary abstract labour time required for its production.

The above line of reasoning has been the subject of all kinds of objections put forward by different interpreters of Marx. As I argue below, those reservations about Marx's argument have their source in an inadequate comprehension of, or insufficient attention to, the nature of the crucial distinction between two different moments involved in Marx's dialectical inquiry and presentation, namely, the stage of analysis and that of synthesis. In particular, I think that it is confusion over these questions that lies at the basis of widespread critiques of Marx's line of argument about the determinations of the commodity form;

¹⁷ Properly speaking, there is a previous step in Marx's presentation. He first starts with the form in which social wealth appears in capitalist society, namely, an 'immense collection of commodities' (Marx 1976g, p. 125), the individual commodity being its elementary form. The unfolding of the determinations behind this appearance is not completed until Volume II, where the unity of the movement of the total social capital itself, in the form of the circuit of commodity capital, is revealed as positing social wealth in the form of an immense collection of commodities (Marx 1978, pp. 174–7). The secondary literature on Volume II is remarkably limited compared to what has been written on Volumes I and III. Certainly, there has been a lot of discussion of the final part on the schemes of reproduction, misguidedly revolving around the notion of a mechanical impossibility of capitalist reproduction as constituting the limit to capital (see Rosdolsky 1986, for a survey of the early classical debates on that question). But the first part of Volume II has been generally neglected. Some of the few works available that deal in some detail with aspects of the former include: Fine 1975; Shortall 1994; Fine and Saad-Filho 2003; Arthur and Reuten 1998. On the circuit of capital, see especially the contribution by Arthur (1998a) in the latter book. More recently, David Harvey has contributed to redress the situation in the second volume to his *Companion to Marx's Capital* (Harvey 2013).

¹⁸ Marx 1976g, p. 163.

not only by well known critics such as Böhm-Bawerk,¹⁹ but also among some of Marx's disciples.²⁰ In brief, the general thrust of those objections is as follows: in *Capital*, Marx did not provide an adequate 'logical proof' that commodities have a 'something' in common and that that 'something' is congealed abstract labour.²¹

The first point at stake in this objection has already been forcefully made by other scholars, so I will refer to it only briefly. In a nutshell, the question comes down to the radical methodological difference which, as Meikle insightfully notes, separates Marx's dialectical approach to science from the formalism and atomism of bourgeois conceptions.²² Clearly based on the latter, Böhm-Bawerk's objections came from someone who could only see science as a purely

¹⁹ Böhm-Bawerk 1975.

²⁰ Thus both Reuten (1993, p. 107) and Arthur (1993, p. 76) agree that Böhm-Bawerk's objections to Marx's line of reasoning about abstract labour as the substance of value are justified; not because Marx is wrong in seeing abstract labour as the substance of value, but because his grounding of that point is defective from a 'systematic dialectical' perspective. This objection can actually be traced back to Hans-Georg Backhaus's groundbreaking essay of 1969, 'On the Dialectics of the Value-Form' (Backhaus 1980, pp. 99–100). A non-Ricardian, value-form critique of Backhaus (and defence of Marx's argument) can be found in Murray (2013).

²¹ A good and concise account of the essence of this critique can be found in Kay (1979, pp. 48–58). See also Park 2003. Specifically, Böhm-Bawerk objected that Marx did not take into consideration common properties other than being products of labour – e.g. utility, scarcity, and so on – as possible determinants of exchange value (Böhm-Bawerk 1975, pp. 74–5). In this sense, it is worth noting that in the process of *inquiry* Marx did consider – but discarded and, hence, excluded from the *presentation* – 'utility in general' as the substance of value. This is evidenced by the following remarks from the preparatory *Manuscripts of 1861–63*: 'We have seen that the basis of value is the fact that human beings relate to each other's labor as equal, and general, and in this form social, labor. This is an abstraction, like all human thought, and social relations only exist among human beings to the extent that they think, and possess this power of abstraction from sensuous individuality and contingency. The kind of political economist who attacks the determination of value by labor time on the ground that the work performed by 2 individuals during the same time is not absolutely equal (although in the same trade), doesn't yet even know what distinguishes human social relations from relations between animals. He is a beast. As beasts, the same fellows then also have no difficulty in overlooking the fact that no 2 use values are absolutely identical (no 2 leaves, Leibniz) and even less difficulty in judging use-values, which have no common measure whatever, as exchange values according to their degree of utility' (Marx 1988, p. 232).

²² Meikle 1985, Chapter 3.

'logical construct' and not the reproduction in thought of 'how things essentially are'.²³ Thus, with 'the characteristic empiricist gap between "truths" and the entities they are supposed to be true of',²⁴ he could only read Marx's initial pages as an abstract, formal process of 'logical proof'.²⁵ The possibility that those pages unfold the real nature and specific self-movement of a determinate content (the commodity form of the product of labour) and do not contain a formal deduction was beyond Böhm-Bawerk's formalistic field of vision.²⁶

Secondly, and more important for the purpose of this chapter, at stake here is another aspect of Marx's argument in the first pages of *Capital* that has not been sufficiently or satisfactorily explored by most scholars: the specific nature and significance of the difference between the phase of analysis and that of synthesis within a dialectical exposition. This double movement in the dialectical *presentation* is not an arbitrary stylistic or rhetorical strategy introduced by Marx, but, as discussed in the first part of this book, reflects a real difference characterising the specificity of dialectical *inquiry*. The latter must involve *both* identification of the different forms taken by the subject whose determinations the dialectical investigation attempts to reproduce in thought (i.e. the analytical separation between social forms according to their relative degree of concreteness) *and* the 'tracking down of their inner connection' (i.e. the *synthetic* discovery of the immanent real necessity linking those different forms).²⁷ A fundamental implication follows from this: the exposition of the

²³ Meikle 1985, p. 80.

²⁴ Meikle 1985, p. 79.

²⁵ As Sayer (1979, pp. 94–5) notes, Althusser and Balibar (1968) and his British followers (Hindess and Hirst 1975 and 1977) fell prey to this appearance.

²⁶ Kay 1979, pp. 51–2. Besides, it is to be noted that Böhm-Bawerk completely missed the actual object of Marx's presentation in Chapter 1 of *Capital*, which is the commodity and not the causal determination of exchange ratios (Kliman 2000, p. 104).

²⁷ Marx 1976g, p. 102. Here my approach differs from that of both Murray and Reuten. The former seems simply to identify analysis with inquiry (what he calls 'phenomenology'), and synthesis with presentation (Murray 2000, pp. 36–8). Reuten does allow for synthetic moments in the process of inquiry, but only as 'provisional outlines of inseparability of phenomena' (Reuten 2000, p. 143). Moreover, although he is right to see the need for the dialectical presentation to be fundamentally synthetic, he does not fully explore the possibility that the dialectical researcher presenting the results of the inquiry may include 'stylised' moments of analysis in order to highlight the unity of the dialectical process of cognition. He only mentions this possibility in passing when discussing Banaji's argument about the twofold starting point of Chapter 1 of *Capital* (Banaji 1979, pp. 36–40; Reuten 2000, p. 158). But as I argue below, this presentational strategy plays a central role at least in

explanation proper of the necessity underlying the relations between different social forms – what would amount to a ‘logical proof’ in the language of formalistic methodological approaches – is not to be found in the dialectical *analysis*, but in the *synthetic* movement of the exposition. Now, since it is in the latter only that the unfolding of the real movement of determination – hence the explanation – actually takes place, the presentation of the findings of the dialectical inquiry could take, in principle, a fully synthetic form.²⁸ However, this is not the way Marx structured his dialectical exposition in Volume 1 of *Capital* (the only one he edited for publication himself); this exposition tends to include, in a ‘stylised’ form, brief presentations of the analytic process.²⁹ Since this peculiar structure of Marx’s presentation of the determinations of the commodity form actually recurs throughout most of Volume 1, and given that its misunderstanding has caused so many controversies among critics and followers alike, it might be worth providing further elaboration on this last point.

In a nutshell, this structure of Marx’s dialectical presentation starts by taking the immediate concrete appearance of the determinate social form at stake. Through a brief analytic movement, it subsequently uncovers its inner essential determination.³⁰ The exposition then proceeds by synthetically unfolding the realisation of that (more abstract) determination. This stage goes on until the specific potentiality defining the essential determination of the social form

the whole of Volume 1. Fineschi (2009) offers an interesting overview of German debates in the 1970s dealing with the connection between Marx’s method of inquiry and his method of presentation.

- 28 Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 317.
- 29 On the role and the pros and cons of this analytic moment in the peculiar structure of the dialectical exposition in *Capital*, Volume 1, organised around presentational ‘nodes’, see Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 323.
- 30 Marx sometimes includes *apparent* (hence flawed) analytical paths in his exposition that are revealed to be such through a movement that leads the reader back to the unmediated starting point, that is, without making any progress towards the discovery of the underlying specific determination defining the object under scrutiny (Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 320). The presentational role of the inclusion of these flawed analytical movements is mainly pedagogical; they serve to place more emphasis on the correct analytical path. Marx’s consideration of the possibility that the particular material properties of the commodity under investigation constitute the more abstract form behind the attribute of general exchangeability is an example of this (Marx 1976g, pp. 127–8). Incidentally, it is to be noted that this is the real meaning of what Böhm-Bawerk mistakenly saw as Marx’s ‘method of exclusion’, through which he allegedly provided a ‘purely negative proof’ of abstract labour as the substance of value (see Böhm-Bawerk 1975, pp. 68–9).

under scrutiny, and whose realisation the exposition is ideally reproducing, negates itself as immediately carried by that abstract social form to become affirmed as immediately pertaining to the more concrete form into which it has metamorphosed. This signals that the first presentational node has been exhausted. A new one thereby begins, but now with the more concrete form whose genesis has been traced in the former as the subject of the movement to be ideally reproduced. However, the new node does not directly start with the inner determinations of this more concrete social form but, again, with its immediate manifestation. An analytic movement therefore precedes the former.³¹

Returning to my main argument about the general aspects of this formal structure of Marx's presentation: as mentioned above, it is the exposition of the *dialectical synthesis* that reveals the 'why' of real relations. The analytic stage only separates a social form from a more abstract one, whose realised potentiality it carries within itself in the form of its own immanent potentiality. In this sense, the analytic stage is about not the *why*, but the *what*. Evidently, since the separation of social forms according to their relative degree of abstractness/concreteness ideally expresses the objective necessity (the real relations) residing in the object, and is not the product of the subjective caprice or imagination of the scientist, the mere reference to the 'what' carries implicitly some hint of the 'why'. Thus, if the dialectical analysis reveals that the value form is the concrete form in which the objectification of the abstract character of private and independent labour affirms itself as an abstract form, the separation between the two already says something about the real relation involved. But this something is no more than, as it were, a 'pointing out', an observation. The actual ideal reproduction of that inner connection – the explanation – takes place in the synthetic movement.³²

³¹ At this juncture, it is important to point out that, in the dialectical *inquiry*, analysis and synthesis overlap in the concrete intellectual labour of the scientist. Thus the actual activity of inquiry of the dialectical researcher involves a constant passage from phases of analysis to phases of synthesis, and therefore they do not immediately appear as distinct aspects of the process of cognition. However, they do constitute two real determinations of the dialectical method and therefore it is crucial to bear their difference in mind. And it is this real difference which appears 'in its purity' in the dialectical exposition, when the author decides to reproduce the analytical stage (whether in whole or in part) in the presentation.

³² In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel refers to this distinction between the role of analysis and synthesis as the difference between the *apprehension* of what is and its *comprehension* (Hegel 1999, pp. 793–4). However, Hegel develops this distinction as pertaining to the 'under-

With this in mind, it is easy to understand the main reason why the criticisms levelled at Marx over his inadequate explanation of abstract labour as the substance of value in the first pages of *Capital* are not simply based on a misunderstanding about the particularities of his argument, but are completely off the mark. To put it simply, those critiques search for an explanation in the wrong place, that is, in the pages where Marx is just presenting the analytic separation of real forms, which comprise the first two sections of Chapter 1. Marx's alleged explanation of why abstract labour is the substance of value in those pages sounds unconvincing simply because it is not there. As we will see, the unfolding of this particular 'why' only occurs in section three, which discusses exchange value as the form of manifestation of value. Before engaging in that aspect of Marx's presentation of the determinations of the commodity form, let us first probe deeper into the *specifically dialectical* form of the analytical moment that precedes it.³³

standing'; that is, an underdeveloped form of thought. Dialectical cognition, 'speculative science' in Hegel's parlance, is for him essentially synthetic (see Caligaris and Starosta 2014).

- 33 Regarding Chapter 1 in particular, this structure has been recognised by Banaji (1979) and Elson (1979a). However, they both seem to reduce the content of the synthetic stage of the presentation simply to the question of revealing exchange value as the necessary mode of expression of value, i.e. to the formal necessity of the money form. But as I argue below, the latter is precisely the moment when Marx is synthetically unfolding the necessity of privately performed abstract labour as the substance of value. Neither Elson nor Banaji explicitly address the question of where exactly the 'why' of abstract labour as the substance of value can be found. Elson in particular seems to concur with Rubin (see below) that it is actually in section 4. Murray (1988, pp. 148–9) rightly sees the structure of Chapter 1 as comprising a 'double movement' of form to content and then from content to form. However, presumably reducing the dialectical movement to the synthetic stage, he sees nothing particularly dialectical in the first movement; hence his analogy with Descartes's analytical reduction of the bit of wax to primary quality matter, i.e. a search for a 'third party' or common element. In reality, the general point about the twofold movement of analysis and synthesis in Marx's exposition had already been made by Rubin in his seminal work on the theory of value (Rubin 1972, p. 113). However, as I shall discuss below, his understanding of the way they structure the exposition is, I think, incorrect. Furthermore, although Rubin does distinguish between the analytic and the synthetic (genetic, as he calls it) stages of the presentation, he seems to restrict the dialectical method to the latter (Rubin 1978, p. 110). In this way, the specific form of the dialectical analysis vis-à-vis the analysis of representational scientific thought is overlooked.

The Phase of Analysis

In contrast to the claims of those critics referred to above, I think that in the opening pages of Chapter 1, Marx is not searching for a common property in commodities. Rather, he is searching for (i.e. not yet unfolding) the specific determination defining the potentiality of the commodity as a historical form of social wealth.³⁴ This potentiality Marx initially ‘discovers’ by looking at the use value of the individual commodity, which in capitalist societies acts as bearer of a second, *historically specific* attribute of the products of labour, namely, *exchange value*. Two things follow from this. First, inasmuch as it is materially borne by the use value of the commodity, this attribute is *intrinsic* to the commodity itself. Second, as argued above, Marx is not *trying to prove logically the existence of a common property*, but *the commodity itself*, in its immediacy, shows that it *has* that ‘common property’ immanent in it.

Here a problem might arise, because Marx does not explicitly say in what that second attribute of the commodity consists. He just names it (*exchange value*) and then directly proceeds to its analysis. I think that the reason for this is that the meaning of that attribute was self-evident in the name itself in light of its everyday usage at that time. The fact that commodities have ‘*exchange value*’ simply means that they have the *power of exchangeability*, that is, *the fantastic aptitude to be transformed into a different use value without the mediation of any material transformation in its bodily existence*.³⁵ What immediately follows in Marx’s exposition is, then, the *dialectical analysis* of this social power of exchangeability of commodities. That is, Marx proceeds to answer what is the source of this specific potentiality intrinsic to the commodity, i.e. what is the abstract form appearing in the concrete form of the power of exchangeability.

34 The difference between these two forms of grasping Marx’s argument in the first pages of *Capital* expresses the difference between the dialectical form of the analysis and that of representational thinking. Many authors have highlighted the distinction between the abstractions of dialectics and those of representational thought as one between ‘real abstractions vs. mental generalisation’ (Saad-Filho 2002) or ‘empiricist abstractions vs. determinate abstractions’ (Gunn 1992). ‘Empiricist abstractions’ have also been called ‘formal abstractions’ (Clarke 1991a) or ‘general abstractions’ (Murray 1988). However, as Iñigo Carrera (2008, p. 282) points out, what most authors have overlooked is that the difference in the respective kinds of abstraction emerges as a result of the very *form* of the process of cognition on the basis of which those abstractions are identified. My argument is that this difference in form not only applies to the synthetic or genetic phase – as is usually assumed – but *crucially pertains to the process of analysis as well*.

35 Iñigo Carrera 2007, p. 216.

As happens with every real form, the first thing he encounters when facing the exchangeability of the commodity is its *immediate manifestation* – the quantitative relation ‘in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another’.³⁶ Thus, the first step in the analysis of exchangeability is the separation of the *content and form* of that specific attribute of the commodity, this being the only way in which one can penetrate through the concrete form in which an abstract form presents itself. Again, this is the immediate object of Marx’s exposition in the passages that follow, and not the search for a ‘common something’ or ‘third thing’, the existence of which the distinction between form and content presupposes.³⁷ This separation between form and content reveals that the different *particular* exchange relations that a commodity establishes with other commodities are actually expressions of something else that inheres in commodities and which gives them the identical *qualitative* potentiality of *general exchangeability* in a certain *magnitude*. Once form and content of the attribute of general exchangeability are distinguished, Marx continues with the analysis of the latter, which consists in separating that form of general exchangeability from the abstract form whose necessity it carries within itself as its ‘other’. The particular form that this analysis takes is, again, not the search for a common element, but the search for the determinate action which posits that specific attribute existing in commodities.³⁸ That action, Marx states, is a human action in one of its facets, namely, productive labour in its general character or abstract labour. Commodities have this attribute of general exchangeability as products of the abstract character of the labour objectified in them.³⁹

³⁶ Marx 1976g, p. 126.

³⁷ In order to avoid confusions, I am not implying that the existence of a common property and exchange equivalence are not important elements of Marx’s arguments. My point is that Marx is not *logically proving* the existence of a common property or that the only possible substance of that common property is abstract labour. He ‘finds’ that common property immanent in the commodity (actually, its immediate manifestation), and then proceeds to its *dialectical* analysis (i.e. separation of form and content). See Kicillof and Starosta 2007a and Iñigo Carrera 2007, for a fuller discussion of why being the products of the abstract character of labour is the only reasonable determination behind the value of commodities.

³⁸ Iñigo Carrera 2007, p. 218.

³⁹ Admittedly, Marx’s transition to abstract labour might seem abrupt and too unproblematic. But here it is important to bear in mind that insofar as it presents results laboriously obtained through previous research, the dialectical exposition has a fluidity which does not reflect the complexity of the real activity of analysis in the process of inquiry, in which the researcher might have mistakenly taken other analytical steps. In principle, the latter

And here there is a tricky aspect in Marx's presentation, which might have contributed to much of the confusion. Because, although at that stage of the argument he has already shown that the common 'something' is the form of general exchangeability, he does not actually *name* it until separating, in turn, that form from its content or substance.

All these things now tell us is that human labour power has been expended to produce them, human labour is accumulated in them. As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values – commodity values [*Warenwerte*].

We have seen that when commodities are exchanged, their exchange value manifests itself as something totally independent of their use value. But if we abstract from their use value, there remains their value, as it has just been defined. The common factor in the exchange relation, or in the exchange value of the commodity, is therefore its value.⁴⁰

Marx names that intrinsic attribute of general exchangeability which is manifested in exchange value, and which is posited by the abstract character of labour, *value*.⁴¹ Now, in opposition to the claims of a great deal of contempor-

do not need to be included in the dialectical presentation, although the researcher might decide to present them in order to stress the correct analytical path that leads to the discovery of the determinate content behind a specific social form (see footnote 30 above). Hence, when considering the action that posits the form of general exchangeability of commodities, the only actions other than labour that Marx contemplates (and obviously discards) are purely natural actions. In other words, he does not consider other kinds of human action, such as exchange or subjective 'valuation' of the utility of the commodity. However, as Iñigo Carrera (2007, p. 24) points out, neither of those other human actions can explain the *two* features that, at that stage of argument, Marx has already discovered as constituting the commodity. First, the fact that the attribute of general exchangeability is specific to capitalist society (subjective valuation of utility is a human action which occurs in non-capitalist modes of production as well, and yet it does not objectify in the value form of the product). Second, the value form is materially carried by the use value of the commodity as its bearer, which means that the action that posits those two attributes must be the same (in this sense, exchange is an action which *presupposes* rather than posits the existence of the use value of the commodity).

⁴⁰ Marx 1976g, p. 128.

⁴¹ This postponement of the naming of value is one of the changes that Marx made to the First Edition of *Capital*. In the latter, the naming of 'value' occurs *before* discovering its content as 'congealed abstract labour' (see Marx 1976e, p. 9). As Fitzsimons (2012, p. 25) notes, the introduction of specific terms *after* the content of their respective determina-

ary literature on Marx's theory of the value form, I think that the (analytic) search for the specific determinations of the commodity – Marx's stated aim in Chapter 1, according to the quote above – is evidently not achieved with the discovery of abstract labour as the substance of value.⁴² Quite to the contrary, that very specificity seemed to have slipped through Marx's fingers. In effect, although he found the specific attribute of the commodity in its value, when he moved to account for its substance he ended up with something which bears

tions has been unfolded is an aspect of Marx's exposition that recurs throughout *Capital*. This presentational strategy is underpinned by a substantive methodological issue that sets apart dialectics from representational thought. Whereas the latter starts out from 'concepts' or 'categories' (i.e. purely ideal or mental abstractions) and their definitions, in dialectical science definitions do not *determine* in advance the content of a term and therefore cannot be the point of departure of the exposition. Instead, they only encapsulate determinations that have already been laboriously *developed*. In other words, definitions are arrived at rather than departed from.

- ⁴² As a reaction to the ahistorical, Ricardian reading of Marx's account of the value form, the 'new consensus' tends to see abstract labour as a purely historical, specific social form. See, among others, De Angelis 1995; Postone 1996; Reuten 1993; Arthur 2001b; Bellofiore and Finelli 1998; Kay 1999; Saad-Filho 1997; Mohun and Himmelweit 1978; de Vroey 1982; Eldred and Haldon 1981; Bellofiore 2009a; Heinrich 2009; Mavroudeas 2004; McGlone and Kliman 2004; Roberts 2004. I have developed a more extended critique of this new consensus in Kicillof and Starosta (2007a and 2007b). Here I can only offer some brief remarks on this issue. As I argue below, abstract labour is a generic material form, a 'productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc.' (Marx 1976g, p. 134). What is specific to capitalist society is the role it plays by being determined as the substance of the most abstract form of objectified social mediation, namely, value. Murray (2000) comes very close to recognising this through the distinction between 'physiological' abstract labour and 'practically abstract' labour. A proper discussion of Murray's own solution to what he terms 'Rubin's dilemma' exceeds the scope of this chapter. Here I would only like to note that Murray's merit is to grasp the importance of highlighting the *materiality* of abstract labour while making clear that this does not necessarily lead to an asocial perspective on the value form. In this way, his recent contribution to the debate provides a necessary correction to what I see as a formalist overreaction of much recent theorising on the value form. See also Reuten's reply to Murray (Reuten 2000) and the latter's rejoinder (Murray 2002). Whilst still seeing abstract labour as capital-specific, Robles Báez (2004) offers probably one of most interesting treatments of the *movement of the contradiction* between the generic, physiological materiality of abstract labour and its historically specific *social* determination as the substance of value deriving from the private character of labour in capitalism. See also Carchedi (2009 and 2011a, pp. 60–74) for a similar argument. The debate on the nature of abstract labour has not been settled and has continued in more recent times. See Bonefeld 2010b and 2011a; Carchedi 2011b; Kicillof and Starosta 2011.

no specifically capitalist character: 'merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour, i.e. of human labour power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure'.⁴³ But it is evident that in any form of society, human beings objectified their subjective labour power and that that process of objectification entailed both a concrete or particular character and an abstract or general one. Thus far, then, this stage of the analytic process does *not* show *why* this generic materiality takes the objectified social form of value. It does not even tell us *what* is the historical form of social labour which is determined as value-producing. It *only* tells us *what* is the *material* determination of that which in capitalist society is *socially* represented in the form of value. This is the reason why Marx still carries on with the analytic search for the '*formal determinants* that it contains as a commodity and which stamp it as a commodity'.⁴⁴ This leads Marx's dialectical analysis to give closer scrutiny to the labour that produces commodities. As any attentive reader could tell, the analytic process continues and only in the section on the dual character of labour does Marx finally find the historically specific form of social labour that produces commodities and, hence, value.

In effect, Marx observes that the individual commodity he is analysing is only one among many within a totality of different commodities. But the same follows for the particular labours that underlie the varied use values taking the commodity form. In other words, Marx points out that generalised commodity production presupposes the existence of an extended social division of labour and that the latter, as the 'totality of varying deployments of useful labour', is an 'eternal necessity of nature for the sake of mediating the material interchange between man and nature (i.e. human life)'.⁴⁵ On the other hand, this analysis also makes clear that the reverse relationship does not hold, that is, the division of labour must not necessarily take the social form of the production of commodities. The formal determination of the commodity must therefore spring from the specific social form taken by the organisation of the division of labour in our present-day society. The commodity, Marx eventually concludes, is the objectification 'of mutually independent acts of labour, performed in isolation'.⁴⁶ In other words, it is the 'labour of private individuals who work independently of each other',⁴⁷ or *private and independent labour*,

43 Marx 1976g, p. 128.

44 Note that had abstract labour as such constituted the specificity of value-positing human action, Marx's analytical search would have come to an end.

45 Marx 1976e, p. 12.

46 Marx 1976g, p. 131.

47 Marx 1976g, p. 165.

which constitutes the specifically capitalist form of labour or productive activity. In this social form of the human life process, the producer has the full conscious productive capacity to control the individual character of her/his labour, but cannot recognise and organise (i.e. she/he is unconscious about) the social determinations of human individuality. Hence the inversion of those social powers into an attribute of the product of labour, namely, the value form. The analytic process completes the search for the specific determinations of the value form by revealing that the attribute of general exchangeability of the commodity springs from the abstract or general character of socially necessary *privately performed* labour materialised in it. The value form, then, becomes known in its essential determination as the *objectified or reified expression of the social character of the individual labour of private and independent producers*. Its objectivity is thus revealed to be wholly social, without an atom of 'matter' entering into it.⁴⁸

The Synthetic Phase of Reproduction Proper

It is only now that the synthetic stage of the presentation begins. This consists in ideally following the realisation of the discovered potentiality immanent in the commodity. From then on, the commodity ceases to be grasped in its exteriority as an 'inert' social form – as a sheer external object – and the exposition starts to follow its self-movement as the subject of the development of those determinations – previously discovered through analysis – into its more concrete forms.⁴⁹ This is subtly indicated by Marx at the end of his discussion of the qualitative determinations of the relative form of value.

48 Marx 1976g, p. 138.

49 Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 321. In a recent article, Arthur (2004a, pp. 41–2) also acknowledges this important aspect of Marx's presentation. However, he still maintains that Marx failed to provide in Chapter 1 an adequate explanation for the determination of abstract labour as the substance of value and should have postponed the introduction of abstract labour until the level of abstraction of the capital form. See also Arthur 2005, p. 119. The shortcoming of this view – also shared by Lapavitsas (2005) and Campbell (2013), the latter following Reichelt (2007) – is that it leads to a formalistic understanding of the value form, which obscures the very question that the latter, in its own reified way, is meant to solve: the establishment of the material unity of social labour when it takes the form of private labour (Brown 2008). This idiosyncratic separation of the form of value from its substance at the level of the commodity form had already been advanced by Itoh (1988). See Clarke (1989), for a critique of Itoh's radical separation of the theory of the form of value and the theory of the substance of value.

We see, then, that everything our analysis of the value of commodities previously told us is repeated by the linen itself, as soon as it enters into association with another commodity, the coat. Only it reveals its thoughts in a language with which it alone is familiar, the language of commodities. In order to tell us that labour creates its own value in its abstract quality of being human labour, it says that the coat, in so far as it counts as its equal, i.e. is value, consists of the same labour as it does itself. In order to inform us that its sublime objectivity as value differs from its stiff and starchy existence as a body, it says that value has the appearance of a coat, and consequently that in so far as the linen itself is an object of value [*Wertding*], it and the coat are as like as two peas.⁵⁰

The unfolding of this movement spoken ‘in the language of commodities’ is precisely what the subsequent synthetic stage of the presentation consists of. Being a *purely social* power of the commodity, value cannot be immediately expressed in its sensuous corporeal materiality. As the capacity of the commodity to be exchanged for other different commodities, value can only be manifested in the social relation between commodities. Therefore, the value of a commodity necessarily expresses itself only in the use value of the commodity that is exchanged for the commodity in question as its equivalent. In this way, value takes the concrete shape of exchange value as its necessary form of appearance. In its most developed form, value acquires independent existence as money and the expression of value in the particular commodity acting as money becomes determined as price. The opposition inherent in the commodity is thus externalised through the doubling of the commodity form into ordinary commodities and money. The power of direct exchangeability of commodities negates itself as such to become affirmed as a social power monopolised by the money form.

It is in the course of the synthetic movement of this development, when seen from the point of view of its *qualitative content*, that the answer to the ‘why’ questions which the analytic stage was unable to provide is given. In other words, it is the development of the expression of value that unfolds the explanation as to why the objectification of the abstract character of privately performed labour takes the social form of value or, to put it differently, why private labour is value-producing.

In a nutshell, the issue comes down to the fact that it is only the expression of value that progressively reveals to us the problem that the commodity form of

⁵⁰ Marx 1976g, pp. 143–4.

the product of labour is meant to solve. I am referring to the mediation in the establishment of the unity of social labour when performed in a private and independent manner. And since this unity becomes condensed in the money form, it is the unfolding of its determinations, synthesised in the peculiarities of the equivalent form and derived from its general determination as the form of immediate exchangeability, that provides the answer to the question as to why private labour must produce value.⁵¹

As the other side of its two-step analytic discovery, the synthetic ideal reproduction of the determinations of the value form comprises two aspects, each one corresponding, respectively, to the second and third peculiarities of the

⁵¹ In the Second Edition of *Capital* and the 'Value form' appendix to the First Edition, Marx develops all the peculiarities of the equivalent form as part of his discussion of the *simple* form of value. By contrast, in the First Edition, the second and third peculiarities are developed in the context of the 'reversed' form of the expanded form of value, an intermediate step which Marx did not include in the Second Edition, where he directly jumped from the expanded form of value to the general form. I think that, for my purpose here, the presentation of the First Edition is clearer. In effect, as Marx himself notes (Marx 1976e, p. 26), the solution to the problem at stake (the establishment of the unity of social labour) is revealed only when the expression of value acquires its plenitude as the form of general exchangeability by relating through the value form the universe of all existing commodities. This only occurs with the general form of value (although a defective – because it is not unified – manifestation, is already found in the expanded form). That is why I shall follow the presentation of the First Edition. On the other hand, there might be a strong reason why Marx decided to move the peculiarities of the equivalent form to the simple expression of value. In a nutshell, the point is that for the presentation of the unfolding of the specific content of the *qualitative* determination involved in the expression of value, its simple form suffices. That is why Marx states that 'the whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this simple form' (Marx 1976g, p. 139). The *further* formal unfolding of the more developed expressions of value only entails *quantitative* differences within that very same *qualitative determination* (Iñigo Carrera 2013). Certainly, that purely *formal* construction *helps* the comprehension of the qualitative determination entailed in the form of value by making explicit aspects of the former which are not *immediately visible* in the simple form. But no novel *quality* is unfolded. In this sense, and contrary to the claims of some scholars (Robles Báez 1997), the expansion and inversion of the simple form of value does not entail, properly speaking, any 'dialectical' or immanent self-movement. It is only a wholly formal (hence extrinsic) *representation*, which involves a *quantitative generalisation* of the qualitative determination already *fully realised* in the simple form. Incidentally, this illustrates what is the role of *formal logic* within dialectical knowledge, namely, the *representation* of the (necessarily external) determinations of quantity, that is, of 'difference determined as indifference' (Iñigo Carrera 2008, pp. 269–70). In the words of Hegel, 'a being that is indifferent with regard to determinacy' (Hegel 1991, p. 157).

equivalent form. The first one – whereby the concrete labour that produces the particular commodity acting as general equivalent becomes the form of manifestation of the general character of human labour – shows, precisely, why that material expenditure of labour power has to act as the social form of labour, i.e. why it is that *abstract* labour is the substance of value. The second one – whereby the private labour that produces the equivalent commodity becomes the immediate incarnation of directly social labour – in turn makes it evident why private labour must produce value at all.

In effect, through the general expression of value, all commodities relate to each other as possessing an identical social essence as exchangeable things in the same magnitude. In other words, albeit in a mediated form that reflects their social form of value as the immediate attribute of the general equivalent, their social relation of general exchangeability achieves its unity. But since they are only values as expressions of the same common social substance, i.e. abstract labour, the unity of the expression of value puts us before the unity of *undifferentiated* human labour. In determining the concrete labour that produced the equivalent as the immediate mode of appearance of abstract human labour, now the social relation between commodities itself makes plain that the different concrete labours that produced them are but different ways in which the total labour power of society has been expended. Those varied useful labours now show themselves to be what they actually are: differentiations of the expenditure of human labour power or determinate modes in which the human body has been productively exerted. In this ‘roundabout way’, as Marx puts it, the development of exchange value confronts us with the generic problem that any society must confront, namely, *the social regulation of the differentiation of human labour*, which ‘is capable of receiving each and every determination ... but is undetermined just in and for itself’⁵² and which is necessary for the reproduction of human life. The exposition of the dialectical analysis of the commodity had already discovered that a commodity-producing society presupposed an extended division of labour. Now we can see that the materialised social relation itself – the value form – *affirms itself as the mediator* in the articulation of that division of labour, i.e. in establishing the relation between different labours as organic specifications of human labour in general.

As *values* the commodities *are* expressions of the *same unity*, of abstract human labour. In the form of *exchange value* they *appear* to one another

52 Marx 1976e, p. 20.

as values and relate themselves to one another *as values*. They thereby relate themselves at the same time to abstract labour as their *common social substance*. Their *social relationship* consists exclusively in counting with respect to one another as expressions of this social substance of theirs which differs only quantitatively, but which is qualitatively equal and hence replaceable and interchangeable with one another ... It is only the kind of thing that can turn mere objects of use into *commodities* and hence into a *social rapport*. But this is just what *value* is. The *form* in which the commodities *count* to one another as values – as coagulations of human labour – is consequently their *social form*.⁵³

The necessity of abstract labour as the substance of value thus becomes finally unfolded. Abstract labour is the substance of value not because a logical argument says that it is the common property of commodities we were searching for in the name of sound principles of logic. Abstract labour becomes determined as the substance of value because *in reality* the latter is the objectified social form that mediates the organisation of that purely material expenditure of the human body into its different concrete forms across society. Given that the latter is what the value form mediates, what else could be represented in that objectified form? On the other hand, it is self-evident that abstract labour does not cease to be a generic material form because of this determination as the substance of value. Hence, as stated above, the determination of labour as abstract labour is not the reason behind its existence as value-producing labour. What is specific to capitalist society is that this purely material form negates itself as simply such so as to become affirmed as the producer of the (objectified) general social relation.⁵⁴ Once objectified, the generic *materiality* of the abstract character of labour plays a particular social role in the process of social metabolism by being represented as the *social objectivity of value*.

The commodities' social form is their relationship to one another as *equal labour*; hence – since the equality of *toto coelo* [utterly] different labours can only consist in an *abstraction from their inequality* – their relationship to one another as *human labour* in general: expenditures of human labour power, which is what all human labours – whatever their content or mode of operation – actually *are*. In each social form of labour, the labours of

53 Marx 1976e, pp. 28–9.

54 Kicillof and Starosta 2007a, 2007b and 2011; Iñigo Carrera 2008, pp. 340–1.

different individuals are related to one another as human labours too, but in this case this *relating itself* counts as the *specifically social form* of the labours.⁵⁵

To recapitulate, thus far I have discussed how the formal development of exchange value, and in particular the unfolding of the determinations of the second peculiarity of the equivalent-form, contains the account of the reason why *abstract labour* is the substance of value. What still remains to be answered is why this general material character of the expenditure of human labour power becomes *substance of value*. In other words, we have to see why human productive activity becomes determined in capitalist society as value-producing, the second step in the synthetic movement referred to above.

The answer to this question follows from the third peculiarity of the equivalent form. In effect, as the social incarnation of human labour in general, the concrete labour that produces the equivalent acquires in its immediacy the form of equality with respect to the other concrete useful labours. In this form of immediate identity with every other concrete labour, the labour that materialises in the general equivalent is *immediately social*, whilst the useful labours producing the rest of commodities remain *not-immediately social*. Thus the development of the expression of value in the form of exchange value puts us before the reason why the organisation of the division of labour must necessarily be mediated in this reified form or, what is the same, why commodity-producing labour is essentially value-producing. Although materially dependent upon one another as part of the ‘primordial system of the division of labour’, this irreducibly social character of *private labours* is not immediately manifested when they are actually objectified in the direct process of production. Hence, this necessary social articulation of private labours is realised through the mediation of the exchange of the products of private labour as commodities. Only at that moment is the question of whether the expenditure of the portion of social labour which each producer personifies is socially useful able to be answered. This is the reason why the social character of the privately performed individual productive activities is specifically represented as a determinate objective attribute of the products of labour: the form of their general exchangeability or their value form. The basis of this reified social mediation thus resides in the fact that the unity of social labour is manifested, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, only *post festum*, through the exchange of the products of

55 Marx 1976e, p. 32.

labour.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the unity of social labour thus becomes socially represented in the form of the particular private product that the rest of commodities separate as their general equivalent and which eventually ossifies in the money form. In tracing the genesis of the latter through the ideal reproduction of the expression of value, the synthetic stage of the dialectical exposition thereby positively unfolds the determinations of that which the analytic process could only *point out*. Namely, that the value form of the product of labour is the materialised general social relation of human beings in the capitalist mode of production and, therefore, the *social subject* of the *form* taken by the social process of production of human life in this historical stage of its development.⁵⁷

Only at this juncture does Marx introduce the fundamental discussion of the fetish character of commodities. The question that immediately arises, and which is hardly addressed in the literature, is why only and precisely then? I think that the answer to this question is inseparable from the issue about the determinate content of the section on commodity fetishism and its place in the overall structure of Marx's exposition in *Capital*. The aim of the next chapter, then, is to proceed to deal with these questions. Again, I will show that only through a proper grasp of the dialectical method can the full implications and significance of Marx's account of commodity fetishism be uncovered.

⁵⁶ Marx 1993, p. 172.

⁵⁷ We shall see that in becoming capital, the materialised social relation of private and independent individuals is constituted as the social subject of the form *and content* of the process of production of human life.